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Preckwinkle praises Oak Park affordable housing complex

By: Phil Rockrohr | prockrohr@pioneerlocal.com | @PhilRockrohr



Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle praises Oak Park for its "portfolio of affordable housing" Thursday at The Grove apartments. | Phil Rockrohr/Sun-Times Media

With the opening of the Grove Apartments, Oak Park has successfully created a "portfolio of affordable housing across its community," Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said Thursday.

"As developers of this project, you took what was formerly an automobile dealership and office building and turned it into residential development," Preckwinkle said at the ribbon-cutting of the \$15 million, four-story complex at 442 S. Grove Ave. "I'm big on adaptive re-use of our beautiful old buildings, rather than just demolishing everything."

Preckwinkle praised Oak Park Housing Authority and Interfaith Housing Development Corporation for creating 51 units, 17 of which are occupied by disabled residents.

“I’ve been a longtime advocate of affordable housing, first as alderman and now, of course, in my present job,” she said.

Cook County contributed \$2 million from the home investment partnership program to the Grove project, Preckwinkle said. Meanwhile, the Illinois Housing Development, Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago, and other agencies and private banks contributed to the project, she said.

“The tough part of these deals is the layered financing,” Preckwinkle said. “You have to have so many actors at the table to make the deals work.”

More than 1,000 area low-income residents applied to reside in the once-controversial project. Of the 51 selected, about two-thirds previously lived in or work in Oak Park, said Ed Solan, executive director of the Housing Authority.

Some 5,200 square feet of commercial space on the first floor will soon be occupied by the Sugar Beet Co-op grocery store.

Two years ago, neighborhood residents pushed to convert the site, the former Comcast regional headquarters for northeastern Illinois, into mixed- rather than low-income housing.

Critics said the complex would increase crime, lower property values and actually promote segregation by concentrating low-income residents in one neighborhood.

Solan, who planned to retire in December but was coaxed to serve another few months until his replacement is hired, was able to build a strong enough coalition to persuade the Village Board to approve the project.

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